

## [Review] Massimo Rospocher, ed. (2012) Beyond the public sphere: opinions, publics, spaces in early modern Europe

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## **Book Review**

Rospoche, M. (Ed.), *Beyond the Public Sphere. Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012. 303 pp. & 18 illustrations. 30 Euros, ISBN: 978-3-428-13914-9, pb.

*Beyond the Public Sphere* is a collection of fourteen essays that have originated from two colloquia: a workshop entitled “Public Sphere and Public opinion: Historical Paradigms?” held in 2008 and a 2010 international conference in Trento, “Beyond the Public Sphere.” The collection delineates current thought on the public sphere debate while evaluating the continued relevance of Jürgen Habermas’s seminal text *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962) to modern conceptions. For Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere allowed private men to discourse, debate and thereby regulate the general rules of society particularly those governing the ‘publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour’ (section 2, chapter 4). In his introduction to *Beyond the Public Sphere*, Massimo Rospoche states that despite the recent vociferous attacks on Habermas’s highly influential model of the public sphere the work still has much value, especially for the early modern historian. Moreover, his ideas retain a wider significance due to the ‘persistence and cyclical return to Habermas’s theory today’ (p. 24) within a global community shaped by communication technologies. A central aspiration of the collection is to expose a paradigmatic shift presently occurring through ‘historiographical transition’ (27), moving beyond Habermas’s deficiencies on the public sphere to create new interpretations.

The work is divided into four sections. The first, ‘Theory and Practices’, contains two essays in which the work of Niklas Luhmann, an opponent of Habermas, is held up as an alternative model for the inadequacies in the latter’s theory. Andreas Gestrich argues that Habermas’s paradigm of a structural transformation of the public sphere is not compelling for early modern historians. Its focus on a bourgeois early modern society fails to recognise the importance of a mixed social basis of the ‘institutions and arenas of public exchange’ (41), running counter to recent research. Gestrich believes that this defective narrative is the result of Habermas’s adoption of a dichotomy between civil society and the state which he inherited from Hegel and Marx. The solution to this theoretical weakness can be found in Luhmann: (also used in the Angela De Benedictis chapter). Luhmann’s rejection of Habermas’s presupposition of an undistorted public discourse to enable rationality in political decision-

making, forces the early modernist to ‘examine individual sectors or subsystems of society more closely’ in determining how public communication has transformed ‘societal differentiation’ (51). Habermas’s narrative of European modernity is also flagged as problematic by Francesco Benigno. He finds that his under-acknowledged inheritance from Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* (1959) utilised a specific conception of the relationship between absolute politics and democracy. Leading to a belief that the bourgeois philosophy of history which arose during a ‘time of absolutism’ (57) guided the intellectual community to separate past (ancient) from present (modern). The development of the *Ancien Régime* into a bourgeois representative public sphere from a world that was the exclusive playground of the aristocratic classes’ (63) required a strong idealistic contrast from which to emerge. Such an interpretation, while popular in Germany in the 1960s has been supplanted by modern research. It underlines the necessity to overcome the restrictions of anachronistic views of history and their relationship to the advancement of the public sphere.

The middle two sections of the work - ‘Spaces, Voices, Humors’ and ‘Publics’ - present six chapters which engage with the topic of the public sphere through considerations on public spaces, public opinion and communication via a number of geographical localities and times in early modern Europe. In these worthy essays a number of salient points emerge. In discussing a public space that embraces different languages, media, and the communicative practices of early sixteenth century Venice, Rospoher and Rosa Salzberg reveal it to be more complex and potent than Habermas’s view. They eschew his notion of the public sphere as an ‘ideal, dissuasive space’ (96). In preference noting the recent critiques of Briggs and Burke (2001) and Lake and Pincus (2006), which envisage a sphere that allowed dynamic, plural, ephemeral, and contingent public debate. A healthy and interconnected European public sphere is visualised by Bronwen Wilson in her treatment of the *album amicorum*. Small and transportable friendship albums of university students, merchants and humanists that were used to collect signatures, mottos, and visual imagery of places they visited across Europe. Wilson’s essay feeds into a general point within these two sections of the breadth and scale of the debates within the public sphere that escaped Habermas’s work. The focus in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* on the advancement of the bourgeois public sphere in Britain at the turn of the late eighteenth century (section 3, chapter 8) disregards the experience of many other European localities. For Rospoher and Salzberg there is the example of Venice in the sixteenth century; Filippo De Vivo Bologna in the seventeenth century; Sandro Landi Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*, and for Silvana Siedel Menchi an

extended view is prompted by early sixteenth century Rotterdam in Erasmus's oeuvre. All of these chapters reveal that Habermas's dating of the public sphere requires augmentation in terms of dating and European geographical locality.

This theme is further evident in the final section 'Opinions': (which also contains two excellent essays by Charles Wilson and Edoardo Tortarolo). In a persuasive essay on the prevalence of Spanish protest texts (or *coplas*) and activities dating back to the sixteenth century, Antonio Castillo Gómez maintains that despite their frequently ephemeral nature such media had great public impact. Moving beyond the bourgeois and Enlightenment paradigm which is 'barely applicable to societies of the Ancien Régime' (228), Gómez is one of a number of scholars who wishes to 'revamp' Habermas's theses. This should facilitate a reappraisal of the impact on seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe of debates, cabinets, and salons through the circulation of information and the distribution of pamphlets to escape an emphasis on isolated individuals in earlier periods. Arjan van Dixhoorn concurs with these sentiments, stating that a serious difficulty in engaging with the public sphere debate after *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* is that its immense bearing guarantees that all other theories take it into account when deliberating the public sphere. Recent research highlights the deficiencies in Habermas's theory. It exposes a lack of appreciation for the complexity of early modern society, its issues, processes, and use of media. It is now necessary for a 'profound reconsideration of the modernity thesis and the related approaches in the study of public opinion history' (269).

The opening and closing sections of *Beyond the Public Sphere* possess the greatest force in tackling Habermas's method along the lines specified in Rospoche's introduction. This worthy collection is diverse in its content and illuminating as a set of essays, encompassing recent historiographical discussions on the public sphere and its own transformation. While their works recognise the numerous deficiencies in Habermas, the very nature of a collection is that it inevitably does not possess the scope to tackle these issues fully and produce a new paradigmatic interpretation of the public sphere.

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